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ABSTRACT

Ageism exists and is prevalent in American society, but attitudes are slowly changing and new public policies are affecting the lives of elderly Americans. Awareness of and participation in the arts is one solution to the far-reaching problem of increasing self-esteem and physical health among the elderly. One method of involving older people in artistic activity is to create an arts program in creative dramatics that could be used in the senior citizen setting. The five elements of drama (conflict, characterization, action, sense awareness, and dialogue) can be worked into a program to help the elderly communicate ideas; this, in turn, would enhance their positive self-concept. In all activities involving creative drama, the human development of the players both individually and as a group is the goal, rather than the satisfaction of an audience. The program must include ways for the elderly to learn and demonstrate skills in interpersonal and intrapersonal communication, listening, group communication and problem-solving, observation, and finally, concentration. These goals can be pursued through a variety of techniques: rhythmic/musical activities, sense awareness exercises, pantomimes, improvisations and narratives, and story dramatization. (Specific suggestions for activities are included.) (KEH)

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"Beyond the Porch, Beneath the Lights:
Outlets for Self-Expression in the Aging"

Creative Dramatics and the Elderly

SCA Panel, San Francisco, CA:
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Acknowledgements

This paper is dedicated to my parents, who are in the "60 Plus" set, but who are young in heart, mind, body, and soul, and who are my inspiration; and to their parents--Bob, Isabelle, and Esther--who are elderly Americans; and to the legacies that they've given to all of us.

Vision: Front and Back, by Sister Patricia Murphy

Firm smooth hands take up the wrinkled one
noting well the contrast.
With mind only now approaching autumn years
and body smug with well-being,
the younger one gushed with pity
and lavished gifts from self-assured abundance.
Hearing, numbed by satisfaction's glow,
almost missed the piercing queries
the old being shouted...
What do you know?
of nights that never break to dawn
proving the sun deserter like so many others?

Can you restore?--
a mind shut down from weariness, or uselessness,
or whys no longer looking for answers?
Are you able to lighten?--
that keen sense of burdensomeness
that only death seems capable of easing?
For one sure of youth,
you hear and see but only have a life story.

This wrinkled shell knows
much more than darkness!
More than loneliness wraps
around thin shoulders!
Feelings deeper than pain course
through these bones!

The cup of life held in this heart
has known bright singing moments and
cherished hours,
and still makes music to be shared!
This mind has filtered and selected
from countless happenings
what's worth living about, and what isn't
what little can be held tightly in one's hand,
and what unbounded treasures can be stored
in one's heart.

Wrinkled and firm hands
together grasp the moments--
teachers and learners both.

America is a nation at risk. We are at risk, in 1989, because of environmental problems, drug problems, and because the education of our youth presents problems. But perhaps the most neglected, yet one of the most severe, problems is the care and health maintenance (mental and physical) of the elderly, or aging, portion of the population.

The problem is severe in proportion to other problems because America, as a nation, is growing older. The "baby-boom" generation (age 20 to 39) which dominates the picture, is the result of increased fertility after WWII--from 1946 to 1962. This generation will dominate the age distribution of the country well into the next century. In fact, when this group begins to collect Social Security benefits in the early part of the 21st century, it will swell the ranks of the 65-plus generation to the point that one in five Americans will be elderly. (1)

Also, the 85-plus population is the fastest growing age group in the country. This part of the population is expected to triple in size between 1980 and 2020 and increase seven times between 1980 and 2050. While the increase in the "very old" population is one of the major achievements of improved disease prevention and health care in this century, it has far-reaching implications for public policy because of the high probability of health problems and need for health and social services for this age group. (2)

It is a given fact that as a nation, we are growing older. Once we grow older, however, we retire and we need to use our spare time wisely to stay mentally and physically well. There are wellness programs popping up on college campuses everywhere, however it is a rare occurence to see wellness activities and programs for the elderly. There are many reasons as to why this may be true.

In my paper, I will discuss the problem of ageism via a literature review, how the self-concept in elderly citizens makes a difference in their care, and how this forms the basis for a solution involving

creative dramatics.

DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM: AGEISM

One reason for the rare occurence of a wellness program for the elderly, is that as a society, we tend to believe even in this day and age, that the elderly are those that are shut-in, can't function by themselves, can't move around very quickly and are basically "waiting to die".

Philip Slater (1964) suggests that our ideas and attitudes about the aging process stem from two contradictory traditions of thought. The classical Greek view of aging is very negative. The ancient Greeks stress the great fortune of youth and the great misfortune of the old. The middle Eastern view of aging, on the other hand, is very positive. Age brings status and prestige to a man not only in his family but also in his community, where it almost automatically confers political influence. (3)

These contradictory attitudes toward old age within Ancient Greek and Middle Eastern cultures has a parallel within our society today. In a summary of research on attitudes toward aging, Erdman Palmore (1982) documents the major conclusions of this body of research as follows:

1. Relative to ratings of other age categories, ratings of old age tend to be more negative.

2. Most people have mixed feelings about various aspects of old age and tend to rate old age positively on some dimensions and negatively on others.

3. There are more stereotypes associated with old age than with younger ages.

4. Many negative stereotypes are held by a majority of persons.

5. Knowledge about aging can be improved and misconceptions can

be reduced by training in gerontology, but attitudes are more resistant to change. (4)

The negative stereotyping of elderly Americans as disfunctional, confined to nursing homes and leading unproductive lives leads to ageism, a term coined by Robert Butler in 1969 to connote wholesale discrimination against all elderly individuals. (5)

One does not need to look far to find evidence of ageism in our society. "Age discrimination occurs when human beings are avoided or excluded in everyday activities because they are the 'wrong age'" (Atchley, 1980, p. 261). From the institutions of higher learning, which are geared almost exclusively to those in their twenties or thirties, to your local newspaper, which is printed so that aging eyes cannot read its content, ageism is rampant in today's world. One of the worst forms of ageism occurs at the workplace. For many of us, our jobs define a large part of our self-image. In this youth-oriented society many of the best jobs are off-limits for anyone over 60 years of age. Job discrimination forces older workers out of their present jobs and makes it nearly impossible for them to find new employment. (6)

Ageism exists and is prevalent in American society; however, although this attitude exists, ironically there is not a reason for it to exist. For example, it is commonly thought that many elderly individuals are senile or that most elderly people are institutionalized in nursing homes. In actuality, only about 5 percent of the elderly are in nursing homes at any one time (Berezin, 1972; Brotman, 1974) and only 4 percent of the elderly suffer from a severe form of senility (Katzman & Carasu, 1975). (7)

With the election of Ronald Reagan as a senior citizen President in 1980 and 1984, researchers began to investigate if American's attitudes toward the elderly were changing, and in the 1980's, attitudes have slightly grown

more positive. Individuals are beginning to realize that aging does not necessarily signal a time of total decline and that rewards can come with advancing age. (8)

Communication with the elderly population is one means to help the attitudes of Americans toward the elderly change. This will take time, because quite often people are unwilling to do just that--take time with their elderly family members.

BASIS FOR A SOLUTION: SUCCESSFUL AGING

Indeed, attitudes need to change, but so do the public policies affecting the lives of elderly Americans. There needs to be increased funding for the housing, feeding, and caring of the elderly in need. But there also needs to be increased public awareness and funding for the body of persons, which is a majority of the elderly population, known as the "well elderly".

The "well elderly" are the subjects of researchers in social science, rcreation and leisure studies, communication studies, as well as researchers in aging studies or gerontology.

Current research seems to suggest that there is a way of life for older Americans associated with being part of the "well elderly", and that way of life is known as "successful aging". B.I. Neugarten, R. Havighurst, and S. Tobin (1961), developed a means to measure successful aging called "The Life Satisfaction Index".

For Neugarten and her colleagues, life satisfaction consisted of five components: zest (as opposed to apathy), resolution and fortitude, congruence between desired and achieved goals, positive self-concept, and mood tone. An elderly individual was considered to be aging successfully to the extent that he or she:

a) takes pleasure from the round of activities that constitutes his everyday life;

b) regards his life as meaningful and accepts resolutely that which life has been;

c) feels he has succeeded in achieving his major goals; d) holds a positive image of self; and e) maintains happy and optimistic attitudes and mood. (9)

Given that successful aging is a goal to be achieved, in order for an elderly person to achieve satisfaction in each of these five areas, the recognition of one's individual strengths, abilities, and potentials should be encouraged, reinforced and supported. (10)

Our society tends to dwell on promoting positive self-concept for children and younger adults, and by the time people reach middle age, it is assumed that people have a positive healthy self-concept and aren't in need of support and encouragement anymore. However, an elderly perosn with a healthy self-concept will not have difficulty expressing ideas and feelings but will be able to converse with others, sharing or accepting constructive criticism without ego collapse. (11)

The self-image of elderly individuals is reinforced by the way they are treated by important people in their lives. To enhance self-esteem, everyone needs love, caring, respect, acceptance, and positive interactions with others, and these are critical factors in an elderly person's ability to cope and adjust successfully. (12)

To build self-esteem among elderly portions of the the population, several factors need to come into play:

1) the encouragement of self-expression of feelings through verbal and nonverbal means,

2) the development of the ability to cope with anger throguh learning how to express emotions,

3) the leading of the elderly in the direction of pursuing new goals. Participation in activities such as hobbies, sports, travel,

interaction social groups, work, and self-actualization may help to direct energies constructively. The refocus of energy in a new direction should be encouraged to develop in the elderly a sense of personal interest, commitment, and motivation for self-growth and the development of relationships. (13)

As a result of these three suggestions for the building of self-esteem among the elderly--self-expression, coping skills, and the pursuit of goals; leisure time, which the elderly have a lot of, needs to be spent in engaging in activities that will enhance a positive self-concept and a feeling of self-worth in each elderly individual.

There are opportunities for travel available to the elderly. There are Elderhostels with opportunities to learn available to the elderly. There are senior citizens centers available to the elderly which offer programs ranging from rock and stamp collecting, to tracing geneologies, to sing-alongs.

For many individuals, the elements and characteristics of work are interwoven in leisure activities. Hobbies and activities become participation in an activity with acceptable goals and a rationale of being useful, justified, and economically productive in some way and not simply participation in an enjoyable action. Some activities are even focused on the investment and monetary value of the leisure. Many elderly offer their leisure time to volunteer activities and feel useful working in subordinate auxiliary roles. Individuals participating in such activities may feel they are a part of a larger work system that offers them a measure of status, prestige, and authority and other meaningful satisfactions. (14)

The older person who has an interest in some activity is less likely to feel nonfunctional, useless, ineffectual, or worthless than one who has disengaged from work and leisure activities. It does appear that meaningful

leisure has the potential to reduce the repercussions of social loss to which the aged are subject, particularly after retirement, and may also facilitate adjustment. Leisure activities may provide an opportunity for the older person to establish an identification with older groups in society that are respected by others. (15)

In our society, identification with respected groups may be important for the elderly to pursue; however, another aspect of the "elderly" existence that is often overlooked is the physical well-being of the elderly, which goes hand in hand with promoting a positive self-image.

There is a need for physical exercise for the older set just as much as there is for the younger set. Although the media does not portray involvement in physical activity by the elderly too often, this does not mean that it isn't important. On the contrary, it is our job, as a nation, to provide opportunities for elders to get together in physically-engaging as well as mentally-engaging activities.

Some senior centers do offer classes in aerobic exercise and/or dance, but more than likely the connotation derived from giving the elderly physical exercise opportunities is "physical therapy for the aged."

SOLUTION

Dance, art, drama, and music combine to form the fine arts. For each of the fine arts, there is a physical well-being that is associated with an individual who is the artist in each particular case.

For the physical and mental health of all Americans and in particular, elderly Americans, an awareness of, and participation in the arts is one solution to the far-reaching problem of and need for increased self-esteem and physical health among the elderly.

What has been done so far? The Older Americans Act of 1965

provided the money necessary for developing new programs aimed at addressing a broad range of needs among the elderly. During the same year that the Older Americans Act was passed, Congress also created the National Endowment for the Arts. This simultaneous development of federally supported facilities for older adults and community arts councils has provided a framework within which older Americans can use their leisure time creatively.(16)

As an example of one way to combine the arts and aging, the city of Kansas City, Missouri developed an arts and aging project which provided older people with opportunities for meaningful leisure activities in the arts as both participants and audience members. (17) Classes were offered in art, drama, and writing, and field trips were scheduled to attend various productions throughout the city.

The project reached over 800 older adults, about 25% of the target population. This proportion is considerably larger than that found among older people nationally; one study reported that only 11 percent of those 60 and over are audience/participants in the visual and performing arts. A related and interesting finding is that only 4 percent of arts administrators were actively seeking the older adult audience. (18)

It is difficult to measure the results of arts programming for the elderly. By its very nature, creativity is intangible and subjective. But, although it is not possible to conclude with certainty that participation in the arts and aging project caused specific changes in the behavior or attitudes of participants, project staff believe they observed marked increases in the self-esteem of participants. One drawing student, for example, remarked, "The class has made me feel that I'm not so useless and a little confident in myself." Two other students discontinued therapy sessions for depression at the

county mental health center. They indicated they had found new outlets for self-expression in their acting class. (19)

An important outcome of the project was the formation of the Senior Arts Council of Greater Kansas City. Composed of interested citizens and area artists of all ages, the council works to provide older adults with expanding opportunities in the arts as artists, teachers, and performers. Among other activities, it promotes intergenerational exchanges in the arts through exhibits, oral histories, and group discussions, and informs civic groups about the creative activities of older adults.

Accessibility is a major consideration in attempting to involve the aged in artistic activity. There are several ways to help older people participate in the arts: (1) by introducing providers (artists, arts administrators, performers, teachers) into the older person's environment; (2) by encouraging arts groups and institutions to actively seek the older adult audience; and (3) by involving the older adult in the community's schools and civic groups as contributing artists, students, performers, or teachers. (20)

PART II: A CREATIVE DRAMATICS PROGRAM: JUSTIFICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

After discussing the problems associated with the growing elderly population in the United States, the basis for a solution to these problems, and a solution involving the arts and the aged, it is my intent to create an arts programming proposal in creative dramatics for the elderly that could be used in the senior citizen center setting.

In order to do this, I must first define creative drama; second, create a justification for its use with senior citizens; and third, propose the program/session.

DEFINITION OF CREATIVE DRAMATICS

Creative Drama is a form of drama that is typically used in the classroom, or educational setting. According to the Children's Theatre Association of America, Creative Drama is: "an improvisational, non-exhibitional, process-centered form of drama in which participants are guided by a leader to imagine, enact, and reflect upon human experiences... The creative drama process is dynamic. The leader guides the group to explore, develop, express and communicate ideas, concepts, and feelings through dramatic enactment. In creative drama the group improvises action and dialogue appropriate to the content it is exploring, using elements of drama to give form and meaning to the experience." (21)

The five elements of drama which are incorporated into creative drama are: conflict, characterization, action, sense awareness, and dialogue. By taking the five elements of drama and working them into a program to help the elderly communicate ideas, this would in turn, enhance their positive self-concept.

JUSTIFICATION

In all activities involving creative drama, the human development of the players both individually and as a group is the goal, rather than the satisfaction of an audience. This would seem to work hand in hand with the strategies mentioned earlier to promote "successful aging".

Other goals and objectives for the use of creative drama are:

1) to develop language and communication abilities
2) to develop problem-solving skills
3) to develop creativity
4) to develop positive self-concept
5) to develop social awareness
6) to develop empathy
7) to learn a clarification of values and attitudes

8) to develop an understanding of the art of theatre

9) to develop the ability to think imaginatively, analytically, and evaluatively

10) to demand attentive listening

11) to encourage people to sharpen their observation of people, of situations, and of natural phenomena, and to commit them to memory

12) to teach people the dynamics of group planning and group decision-making; the give and take process that brings people to new solutions

13) to help people understand the structure of a narrative

14) to strengthen the learner's abilities to concentrate as they create ideas and characters in dramatic play. (22)

If we look to meeting these goals and objectives as the key to an effective creative drama program for the elderly, careful program planning must be implemented. The program must include ways for the elderly to learn and demonstrate interpersonal and intrapersonal communication, listening, group communication and problem-solving skills, observation skills, and finally, concentration skills.

In order to best fuse the elements of drama with the betterment of self-concept and opportunities to learn communication skills, the program planner needs to consider the five forms of creative drama to achieve the goals and objectives discussed earlier. The five forms are: rhythmic/musical activities, sense awareness exercises, pantomimes, improvisations, and narratives, or story dramatization. (23)

Rhythmic and Musical Activities are imitative and interpretive reactions to regular and irregular rhythmic patterns and musical moods. Suggestions for activities will follow after this definitional section.

Sense Awareness Exercises are activities in which a person actually uses one or more of the five senses and then is encouraged to interpret the experience imaginatively. Suggestions will follow.

Pantomime is the creation in space of an object, animal or character

in a situation by using concentration and bodily movement with no sounds or dialogue from the player or players. Suggestions will follow.

Improvisation is the creating of a character through both movement and speech. The person focuses on "becoming" the person, who thinks, feels and reacts to a particular situation. "Staying in character" means to sustain that concentration as a character. Sometimes characters are combined to create a short improvised scene of action and reaction. Suggestions will follow.

Narrative or Story Dramatization is the creating of an improvised story based on sources such as literature, science, history, current events or the participant's imaginations. The participants are guided by a leader who tells the narrative and then discusses its dramatic action with them. After planning the playing, the participants act out the narratives, either from beginning to end or in segments, and each playing is evaluated by the participants before the scenes are repeated a second and third time. If the narrative has been played initially in segments the final dramatizations can be the recreation of the complete story. (24)

SUGGESTIONS

Rhythmic/Musical Activities

1) Move around the room to the beat of the music. Use the full space of the classroom to really feel a part of the space.

2) Be different characters as you move around the room. Suggestions for characters are: animals, different types of people (business executives, workers of different occupations, young children).

3) Take the group through a physical warm-up activity, similar to aerobics, with songs playing in the background.

4) After moving around the room, have the senior citizens come up with scenes based on their impressions from the music. Instrumental music works best here, so that words don't confuse personal interpretations of

the musical rhythms. Either pantomime the scenes and call the activity "Silent Movies", or improvise the scenes including dialogue.

5) Have a sing-along with the elderly seniors, and put a different twist to it--teach them physical motions that go with the songs.

Sense Awareness Exercises

1) Have the participants recall an early sense memory of a particular smell, taste, touch, sight, or sound that they remember from their childhood days. Have them tell or write their memory stories, then choose a few from the group to act out as a group.

2) In order to become more aware of their sense of hearing, have participants listen to a sound effects tape, and try to identify sounds, then create a sound story with a beginning, middle, and end using only the sounds that they heard from the tape.

3) Pass around bags with objects in them that are strange to touch. Have participants identify what the objects are by writing descriptive sentences about what they are feeling in the bags. Create a story using the objects afterwards. The same could be done for sense of smell, or sense of taste.

4) Have elders participate in a trust walk. This activity involves having partners, and putting blindfolds on one person, and having the partner lead him/her around the building and outside with the blindfold on. Let partners do this for about ten minutes, then switch the blindfold to the other person. This increases an awareness of all five senses, and an appreciation for the sense of sight.

5) Talk about stories the participants have written or read, and identify strong sense images from them. Talk about how to create strong sense images in your own writing.

Pantomime

1) Pantomime emotions with the use of the body, through gestures, facial expressions, movement, kinesics. Then have participants identify and talk about their emotions.

2) Pantomime the daily routine of each person. Discuss.

3) Pantomime poems and stories.

4) Have participants break into pairs. Then, guide them through the mirror mime exercise. This is where person A leads the other person through a series of hand and body motions, and person B imitates as nearly as possible, in silence, what person A is doing. Then after a few minutes, switch and have person A be the mirror.

5) Have group get in a large circle. Begin with a ball of clay, and form it into something that is noticeable to all of the participants. Pass it on to the person to your right, and then he/she will form it into something else, and pass it on, until the ball of clay is returned to you.

Improvisation

1) Create lists of persons, places, and situations. Put in three separate stacks. Have two people draw one from each stack, and create a scene with the information given.

2) Create role-play situations that will help solve any problems that class members might be feeling.

3) Have two people start a scene riding up to the top floor of a building with two people who they've never met. Then let the scene go for awhile, and have people jump in and change the focus of the scene. Yell "freeze" every time you think the scene needs help and changing. Get involved with the scenes yourself to keep the improvisation going. Changes could involve characters, settings, or the situation.

4) Create a class improvisational story. One person starts with a word, or a sentence, and then the next person adds to it, and so on, around the circle, until a story is complete.

5) Have each class member create a character that is unlike himself/herself. Then, have the characters go "on parade" in front of the rest of the class and tell their life stories in an improvisational manner. Then, have people pair off with "characters" they would like to get to know better, and have them create an improvisation with their two characters.

Narrative/Story Drama

1) Have class act out a story/poem, assigning parts, and performing in front of the senior citizen's center residents/members at a meeting.

2) Have class write a story/poem, and do the same as above.

3) Have class perform scenes from plays for the local community theatre group.

4) Have class create their own theatre troupe, and tour the state!

5) Have class collect oral histories from senior center residents, write and produce a play based on the lives of these people.

(These suggestions were compiled and created by Mary Hogg.)

If you would like further information on any part of this paper, or more information on any of these suggestions, please feel free to write or call me:

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ENDNOTES

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2) Ibid, p. 15.

3) Communication and Aging, p. 14.

4) Ibid, p. 15.

5) Ibid, p. 16.

6) The Social Forces in Later Life , p. 261.

7) Communication and Aging, p. 19.

8) Ibid, p. 16.

9) Ibid, pp. 240-241.

10) Successful Aging, p. 96.

11) Ibid, p. 97.

12) Ibid, p. 97.

13) Ibid, p. 98.

14) Ibid, p. 150.

15) Ibid, p. 150.

16) The Dynamics of Aging, p. 365.

17) Ibid, p. 366.

18) Ibid, p. 367.

19) Ibid, p. 367.

20) Ibid, p. 369.

21) Creative Drama for the Classroom Teacher, p. 4.

22) Ibid, pp. 5-10.

23) Ibid, chapter 1.

24) Ibid, chapter 1.